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SUBJECT: NEW KHAKASSIA GOVERNOR PUSHES ECONOMIC REFORM,  
SALUTES KREMLIN

11. (SBU) Summary. A recent trip to the small southern Siberian republic of Khakassia revealed strong local government clearly support for the United Russia party, despite difficult economic challenges in the near future. Newly-appointed Governor Zimin has established his reputation as a Medvedev loyalist, having vowed in the runup to the March 1 parliamentary elections to squash all opposition parties. Economically, he made promises reminiscent of the Communist era, pledging to improve Khakassia's living standards by developing local agriculture and animal husbandry. With close ties to Russian Railroad Director Yakunin and Emergency Situations Minister Shoygu, Zimin entered office well-positioned for success. However, Khakassia's capital of Abakan boasts few serious business ties and serves as a mere waystation for Trans-Siberian travelers, complicating Zimin's ability to deliver from the outset. Few social tensions burden the residents of Khakassia, while academics applauded a rebirth in native culture. Protestant religious groups, still reeling from past harassment and discrimination, hope cautiously for improved conditions for free religious observation. End Summary.

United Russia: Leader of Pack in Khakassia  
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12. (SBU) Administration representatives welcomed the first visit by an United States Government representative with some trepidation, offering scripted support for United Russia (ER) leadership. Electoral Commission Chairman Viktor Gubin welcomed us to Khakassia by touting United Russia's recent March 1 electoral success, even though the margin of victory in the parliamentary elections proved slimmer than expected. He told us April 27 that the United Russia party received almost 56 percent of the votes (with a 46 percent turnout) in the March 1 voting for the Supreme Council, easily surpassing its nearest competitors from the Communist Party (15 percent), Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (10 percent), Just Russia (7.6 percent), and the local Patriots of Russia (7.5 percent), with the latter only being allowed to register after intervention by the Russian Central Electoral Commission. APN Moscow news agency reported on March 27, however, that ER received just under 48 percent of the vote, and that Zimin himself had tried to keep opposition parties out of the race, promising to drive the "Patriots of Russia" or similar opposition groups from the political stage. According to a Russian daily Nezavisimaya Gazeta article from March 3, Zimin also had issued a pre-election warning to all opposition candidates not to criticize the current regime. APN claimed that the General Council of United Russia decided to pay local party branches large sums of money for achieving certain benchmarks, including a 750,000 ruble (approximately 22,700 USD) payout to regions which garnered from 55 to 70 percent of the vote, providing ER with a potential incentive for vote rigging.

Kremlin Solidarity  
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¶3. (SBU) Zimin assumed his post on January 15, having been nominated by Medvedev in December 2008. Zimin, who reportedly maintains close ties to his former superior at the Russian Railways Vladimir Yakunin (Note: Zimin headed the Krasnoyarsk Railway Department's Abakan Division until December 2007) and Minister of Emergency Situations Sergey Shoygu, served as a State Duma Deputy and replaced outgoing Governor Aleksey Lebed. While rumors surrounded the departure of Lebed, most experts were not surprised. A recent index of governor's performances placed Lebed near the bottom of the list, and First Deputy Minister of the Presidential Administration Vladislav Surkov commented on February 17 that Lebed's removal was "hardly a random decision." According to Russian daily Gazeta on December 8, 2008, Foundation for the Development of Information Policy's regional program leader Aleksandr Kynev stated that the locally popular Lebed, who had headed the region since 1996, lost out to Zimin because of his tense relations with Moscow. Hardly falling on tough times, Lebed managed to land a position in the State Duma after his term expired.

¶4. (SBU) Khakassia Republic dual representative for the Civil Front and Right Cause movements Galina Gorchakova cautiously explained to us April 28 that, while she did not necessarily support the views of the recently elected governor of the Khakassia Republic, it was "too early to judge his performance," noting that Zimin's push to improve the republic's agriculture, transportation, and tourism sectors could boost the welfare of the local population. Admitting that local opposition movements had achieved virtually zero traction with the republic's populace, she

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found herself acting more as a reporter than a political organizer. The broad diversity of party representation in local politics encouraged Gorchakova, but she doubted that smaller parties would successfully voice their opinions, ultimately becoming lapdogs of United Russia. Abakan City Council Chairwoman Zinaida Telina gave us the official line on April 28, saying that Zimin brought new energy to Khakassia's development, and that the entire city government stood "ready to support him at all levels."

Everything in the Periodic Table

¶5. (SBU) In Khakassia, Chamber of Commerce and Trade President Serzh Bakhshiyevich Adamyan marketed the republic's vast mineral reserves, repeating the old Soviet adage that "every element in the periodic table was under the ground of Khakassia." But when the discussion turned from potential to productivity, he lamented how Khakassia's "unlucky global position" made it difficult for investors to reach the region. While hydroelectricity, light metals, and the coal sector in Khakassia continued to serve as a backbone to its financial stability, the region needed to concentrate on expansion of its agricultural and animal husbandry sectors in order to reduce the levels of imports it has historically required. Adamyan added that the effects of global warming had helped to diversify the region's crop yields, saying that Siberians can now grow watermelons, apricots, and grapes. He noted that the republic's strong ties with the EU, China, Ukraine, Australia, and Turkey could serve as a launching pad for future investment, which was not currently significant. Khakassia's potential for tourism also stirred Adamyan to produce pictures and short films of its natural treasures and modern conveniences, including a state-of-the-art ski resort. Unfortunately, Khakassia's position as the half-way point between Moscow and Vladivostok gave few, including Adamyan, the illusion that tourists would flock in great number to Abakan.

Economy Going Down With Deripaska

¶6. (SBU) While agreeing that unemployment was higher than the official level of 3.4 percent, Adamyan underlined the region's independence from foreign labor and migration, saying that the small Chinese, Tajik, and Kyrgyz diasporas accounted for less than one percent of the total population. The downturn in oligarch Oleg Deripaska's RusAl operations in Krasnoyarsk had impacted the labor force and production levels of Khakassia most severely, according to Adamyan, causing a large but uncertain number of redundancies. While the region had imported a large number of materials used in aluminum foil production, those relationships with other countries had recently dried up. United Russia continued to mobilize support for its anti-crisis plan, organizing a rally on January 31 with demonstrators bearing signs with the slogan "People-Medvedev-Putin, We shall win Together!" Considering that the average wage in Abakan totals just 17,000 rubles per month (approximately 515 USD), Adamyan admitted that no level of government support will prevent high school and college graduates from seeking more lucrative opportunities in Moscow.

#### Cultural Revitalization

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¶7. (SBU) Head researcher at Khakassia State University's Humanitarian Research Institute Larissa Anzhiganova characterized respect for Khakass culture in the republic as "improved," and categorically better than in the Soviet era. She drew attention to the increasing number of cultural programs celebrating Khakass traditions, shamanism, and ethnic diversity in the region, and noted that ethnic Khakass had ascended to the highest ranks in local government and business despite constituting only 12 percent of the populace. Anzhiganova added that the Khakass language, listed as "definitely endangered" by UNESCO, could also see a resurgence because of the republic's internal migration patterns. Young high school graduates from rural Khakass-speaking families continued to move to Abakan in search of work, bringing their language skills with them to the Russian-speaking capital. Taking the next step from preservation to expansion of the language will be more difficult, she noted, since the number of teachers with passable skills was low.

#### Religious Freedom For Most, But Not All

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¶8. (SBU) While shamanism and Russian Orthodoxy flourish in

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the region, some religious groups suffer from government interference. Though Deputy Minister of Inter-Ethnic and Religious Affairs for the Republic of Khakassia Irina Katsybina told us that there never have been any conflicts on religious grounds in the republic, Pastor Ruslan Belokhevich and Assistant Pastor Aleksandr Prus of the Glorification Pentecostal Church in Abakan felt differently. They told us on April 27 that although current conditions under Governor Zimin appeared calm, the FSB had harassed numerous church members from 2004 to 2006, and government officials had denied their right to worship on many occasions. He attributed the harassment to Putin's policies, but believed that Medvedev would continue to pursue a more liberal path that favored minority religions. The one issue which greatly concerned them, however, was the recent appointment of Alexander Dvorkin as the head of the Ministry of Justice's Committee on Religious Expertise. Both pastors feared that this development could signal an immediate deterioration of conditions for evangelical Christians, and could impact the effectiveness of the church's youth campaigns to combat drug abuse and abortion. Noting that some other groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses faced discrimination, Belokhevich said that the Pentecostals had suffered the most at the hands of the local authorities as he pulled the SIM card from his cell phone to prevent FSB eavesdropping. Baptist pastor Sergey Stalmatov also noted that the Pentecostals faced

disproportionate attention, but could not discern why.

Comment

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19. (SBU) Abakan's position on a southern spur of the Trans-Siberian Railroad will keep it relevant, especially if large enterprises such as RusAl can again establish a strong position in the region, but few will rush to exploit its mineral or natural bounty. In order to expand its local agriculture or tourism sectors, Khakassia will need massive investment from the federal government, an unlikely development considering Moscow's recent decision to decrease allotments for infrastructure.  
RUBIN